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# **Sociological Strand – Worship and Action**

**Mathew Guest**

## **Introduction**

Here we draw from the discipline of sociology in addressing the worship and social action of local churches, focusing on three related questions: What are the social functions of worship – that is, what function does worship have for those who take part? How does worship and ritual relate to the culture of participants? And how do local churches contribute to this culture through projects of regeneration that aim to enhance the welfare of society and its members?

## **The Social Function of Worship**

Many early social scientific studies of myth and ritual focused on questions of function, addressing what it is rituals actually do that accounts for their importance within a social group. This approach assumes that theological explanations alone are insufficient, and that social factors need to be taken into account. Moreover, these are factors about which ritual participants may be unaware. While individuals might say they attend a church service merely in order to worship God this activity also has latent functions – perhaps the consolidation of

friendship networks, or the generation of feelings of personal empowerment – which are just as, if not more, important as factors in explaining why those who attend participate as they do (McGrail, 2004). This approach is central to the school of functionalist sociology, most famously developed by Talcott Parsons, but ultimately grounded in the work of the French sociologist Emile Durkheim (1858–1917).

According to Durkheim, when people gather together to perform rituals, they generate a ‘collective effervescence’, a sense of shared power that reinforces the shared ideas and sentiments of their social group. Individuals both learn these ideas and sentiments, and have them regularly reaffirmed, by participating in corporate ritual acts that thereby infuse reality with a sense of order and meaning. In this way, ritual and religious worship are at the centre of the process through which humans find meaning in the world. Within the context of Christian tradition, it is by taking part in corporate acts of worship that Christians are exposed to the texts, teachings and symbols that are then used to fund a developing Christian identity. Using the language of the sociology of knowledge, rituals function as ‘plausibility structures’; that is, they reinforce the worldview shared among members of a religious group.

However, for Durkheim, worship and ritual do not merely produce meaning; these corporate acts also bind humans together, by gathering them around a common set of symbols – at the most basic level around what Durkheim calls the totem. He takes this idea from the culture of Australian aborigines, which forms the empirical focus of his seminal text *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (Durkheim, 1915/1995). The totem is the symbolic centre of the aboriginal tribe; it determines tribal allegiances – as well as enmities – and elicits a commitment to the group that fosters cohesion among its members. This insight has obvious applications to Christian worship, which often fosters feelings of togetherness and community among those taking part. Congregations express their collective identity in worship, and through this process members reinforce their sense of inclusion within a particular group. In this respect worship reinforces community.

Durkheim argues that all ritual symbols may function in this way, and are essential to the cohesion of both the religious group and the society in which it is situated. In this respect ritual and worship are understood to have a function that extends far beyond the religious traditions that lay claim to them. They function as a centre of meanings whose influence radiates out into the ‘secular’ domain. Moreover, if ritual symbols begin to lose their power, then there is a risk of what

Durkheim calls *anomie*, or normlessness. In simple terms, the breakdown of effective social rituals triggers a shift from order into chaos, from meaning to meaninglessness. Ritual and worship are in this respect integral to the preservation of order in the social world.

Durkheim's legacy raises interesting questions about the relationship between the religious and the secular. His definition of religion focused on how a body of beliefs and practices unites its adherents into a 'moral community' (Durkheim, 1915/1995). This allows him to attribute the functions we might associate with sacred rituals to what are conventionally understood to be secular activities. This has led some scholars to treat popular corporate events such as pop concerts and football matches as essentially like, some would argue surrogates for, occasions of Christian worship. Both unite participants through shared bonds of allegiance, which are expressed and celebrated at a special communal assembly. Both unite affiliates around a central symbolic totem, be it a winning team, pop group or sacred icon. And both express a set of values and meanings that bestow orderliness upon a complex social world.

While Durkheim presents ritual as an effective source of social order, some scholars have appropriated his work in more critical analyses of how power is distributed and maintained in religious groups. Worship events are often key contexts in which relations of power are negotiated, as they bring church communities together in a public space. At such events, norms of authority and hierarchy are often implicit in the very structure of devotional practice. For example, in her illuminating study of Roman Catholic charismatic groups, Meredith McGuire (1982) draws a distinction between 'open' and 'closed' prayer meetings. 'Open' meetings are more inclusive in their membership, incorporate fewer specialized roles, and permit all participants to actively contribute to the proceedings, offering prayers, prophecies and witnessing about their spiritual experiences. By contrast, 'closed' meetings are more structured, have a more exclusive approach to membership, and place strong limitations on who may speak and when during prayer meetings. Indeed, new members are instructed about these rules before their first meeting, and those who break established rules of conduct are faced with sanctions imposed by leaders, unrelenting members being asked to leave. McGuire shows how what appear to



In this analysis, while worship is used as a means of maintaining social order, this order includes the retention of existing inequalities of power. McGuire explores this issue by asking questions like, Who is permitted to speak? Who has the power to control the order of meetings? Who has the power to limit the speech of others? These are sociological questions, and are useful tools in unveiling social processes that often lie beneath Christian worship and ritual practice. Moreover, these insights highlight the need for worship to be studied in terms of local practice, observed in process. Only in this way may we begin to understand the differentiation of roles and nuances of behaviour that characterize worship and ritual events.

## The Meaning and Culture of Worship

Sociological approaches that emphasize the question of social function have often been criticized for overlooking questions of meaning. What does it mean to take part in an act of worship, given the experiences surrounding an event? This question opens up a whole new set of issues. For example, working within a sociological frame of reference, it is not enough to merely describe the meanings participants ascribe to their actions; it is also important to explore how these meanings are constructed, and to trace the resources participants draw from in this meaning-making exercise. Moreover, it is important to be critically aware of the processes we use to access these meanings.

In one sense, the question of meaning is tied to the question of culture. It is possible to argue that worship events communicate the common culture of those taking part, i.e. the values, beliefs and behavioural norms that together make up their identity as a social collective. However, it is important to remember that while congregations do express their own identities, they are also made up of numerous individuals, and that each member will have a unique experience of each worship event. Any attempt to capture the collective identity of the congregation as it is expressed in worship will inevitably paper over these differences. At the same time we would do well to take heed of Hopewell's (1987) helpful reminder that each congregation has its own story, and that this story is shaped by the social demographics of the congregation, its history, and its location within wider social forces. This is where issues of gender, age and ethnic difference are important factors, as they can point to differentials of power and priority which influence the questions congregations ask of themselves, and

influence which worship practices are judged most appropriate. So while congregations are composed of individuals, these individuals share a common pool of experiences and participate in what might be called a common discourse. It is through this discourse that the meaning of worship is constructed, expressed and affirmed in local contexts.

But how might we access these meanings, and understand the mechanisms through which they are generated? Three approaches are discernible in the literature, distinguishable by different assumptions about the bases of meaning. First, there is the approach that conceives meaning as something to be decoded on the basis of an observation of the structure and content of the worship event itself. This may be called the objectivist approach, and distinguished many early liturgical studies, which located the meaning of worship events solely in the texts that were used within them. For example, some early liturgists sought to discuss the 'meaning' of the Anglican Eucharist simply in terms of the words enunciated by the celebrant and the liturgical responses offered by the congregation. This clearly ignores many important aspects of the worship experience, not least the different social identities of those taking part. However, the objectivist approach is not to be ruled out altogether. For example, it is clear that theological elements of church tradition – shaped by denominational identity – are embedded in the structure of the worship event and may be read from it. For example, consider the differences between a Protestant charismatic service and a Roman Catholic Mass. The charismatic service may be characterized as 'interactive': it is built around a participatory model that encourages congregational members to have an active role in shaping the service. This manifests itself in shared leadership roles; impromptu outbursts of prayer, glossolalia or prophecy; expressive sung worship accompanied by dancing or improvised bodily movement. By contrast, at the Roman Catholic Mass, the congregation do not respond as individuals, but as a united group, all taking part in the rite according to a formalized order. Behaviour in this respect is not spontaneous and active, but solemn, controlled and comparatively passive. It is also scripted, with the authorized liturgy dictating the measured participation of the congregation, as well as the order of the service as a whole. In both cases, the theological values of each tradition are embedded in the worship event: for the charismatics, a clear affirmation of the 'priesthood of all believers' (emphasized in their participatory model), and of the genuine presence of the Holy Spirit in and through the congregation; for the Catholics, a sense of conformity to an established

liturgical paradigm that reflects the importance attached to being a part of the worldwide apostolic church.

Thus, the structure and form of worship events are vehicles of theological tradition, expressing key values and beliefs through ceremonial order, style of sung worship and the differentiation of roles. In addition to this we might add conventions of dress, which highlight differences in status, or architectural features of churches, which reinforce the shared worldview through the definition of sacred space. However, in addition to embodying theological traditions – meanings associated with the ‘official’ canons of teaching that the church uses to express its beliefs – worship and ritual also embody other meanings. Indeed, worship events taken as a whole can communicate a lot about the social and religious identities of those who take part in them that does not directly refer to the religious tradition invoked. In broad terms, they transmit messages which fall into two main categories: the canonical, embodying the teachings of religious tradition, and the indexical (see the Anthropological Strand of the Global and Local Context, Section 3.1 above), which convey an individual’s status within their social system (Rappaport, 1979). A focus on the ‘indexical’ in worship can reveal congregational peculiarities in terms of social and family backgrounds, of education, affluence and corresponding cultural identity, as well as of theological persuasion. In this respect worship is the vehicle of social as well as theological meaning. Indeed, in so far as the two are fused, worship can be seen as a means of sacralizing a shared worldview, or at least lending legitimacy to ideas that have infiltrated the event not through tradition, but through the social identities of its participants.

The second approach is based on a critique of the objectivist model, grounded in the argument that to simply decode meaning from observation is to ignore the actual experiences and perceptions of social actors. To talk about the meaning of worship while ignoring the perceptions of worshippers is to unjustly impose upon them an alien meaning framework. This critique proceeds from a broader argument about sociological method, and refers back to the work of Max Weber (1864–1920). Weber argued that sociology should not try to study social action from the outside like the natural sciences, but should acknowledge the meanings social actors themselves ascribe to their behaviour (Weber, 1947/1964). *Verstehen* (usually translated as ‘understanding’) is the method sociologists should use to access these meanings, and involves putting ourselves in the position of those whom we study. For this reason this second approach may be called the *Verstehen* approach.



The *Verstehen* approach has not merely encouraged researchers to attempt a greater empathy with those they study. It has also raised the issue of what place we give to what participants actually say about their experiences of worship. For, from a sociological perspective, it is not acceptable to speak about the experiences of social actors without attempting to engage with the empirical reality of the situation; in practical terms, to talk to those who take part. This produces a more complex 'meaning' of the worship experience, as it allows for interpersonal difference, and therefore demands careful handling. It is an approach that is particularly illuminating when investigating congregations in which there are clear differentials of power between different members. Interviews with participants may reveal that while some find their services are a source of immense personal fulfilment, others feel more alienated and marginalized. Such differences may be due to a number of factors, not least the allocation of specialist roles, tension between different parties, or the contentious innovations of a new worship leader – but these may only be discerned, and explored in depth, when the expressed views of those taking part in a worship event are taken into account.

The third approach moves beyond *Verstehen* in conceiving the meaning of the worship event as emerging out of a process of negotiation between the researcher and the researched. Again, this notion is a response to wider movements in the social sciences, particularly the argument that researchers are constituent parts of the research process, and bring their own influence to bear on the production of knowledge. This is the reflexive approach, and calls for the researcher to situate him/herself within the analysis, in order to render transparent the ways in which researcher influence shapes how acts of worship are portrayed. From this perspective, the objectivist and even the *Verstehen* approach are misguided, as they make the mistake of assuming that the researcher can detach him/herself from the object of study. Instead, the reflexive approach places the researcher at the heart of the research account, and refers back to the experience of the researcher in gaining insights into the worship event.

The reflexive approach can generate useful tools for analysis. Reflecting on how one's own behaviour and reactions are different from those of others present helps us to see what is distinctive about a particular act of worship. It highlights what is most alien and most comfortable to us, and thereby helps us paint a more subtle picture of cultural boundaries. In freeing us from the need to maintain objective distance, it also allows us to reflect on our own experience and include



this in our accounts. To some critics, this is to go too far and admit subjective factors into the process, something that renders research at best impressionistic. However, as long as our own experiences are subjected to appropriate critical reflection, then personal experience can offer a fruitful and evocative resource not available to the non-reflexive researcher. Moreover, in acknowledging our own responses to a worship experience, we arguably engage in a more honest and respectful approach to research, as we place ourselves in a position of vulnerability alongside those we are seeking to understand.

### **Worship, Action and the Wider Social World**

A study of the worship life of a particular church often exposes the ways in which it relates to its surrounding culture, for it is at occasions of worship that churches affirm their public mission and express their collective identities as congregations. A common route into this problem refers to the distinction between the parish, serving the needs of the locale, and the gathered congregation, serving the needs of its members. This distinction is often seen as echoing theological differences, with the latter type finding allegiance among those more evangelical Christians who place a premium on personal commitment as a signal of Christian identity, and the former finding support among more 'liberal' churches which emphasize Christian mission as public service to the poor and needy.

Some sociologists have argued that our consumer culture is especially favourable to the 'gathered' type of church, with individual attendees acting as 'spiritual shoppers', steering their participation according to which style of worship is most in tune with their personal taste. These individuals are presented as 'elective parochials', migrant workers who shift their allegiance and community involvement upon moving into a new locale, and many 'megachurches' on the outskirts of cities depend upon these transient worshippers as the heart of their congregational body. However, this trend is also symptomatic of a wider social problem, relating to the decline of local community and the depletion of what Robert Putnam (2000) has called 'social capital'.

Putnam's work has called attention to a set of problems acknowledged by both church and state, and is applied with particular utility in discussions about the declining levels of people willing to contribute to voluntary welfare services. Christian denominations in Britain have a longstanding commitment to social welfare, channelled

through voluntary agencies such as Methodist Homes for the Aged and The Children's Society. However, the downscaling of the centralized welfare state in the 1980s triggered the emergence of provision at the local level, for example, through the Church Urban Fund which was established in 1987 to support social action projects in response to the Faith in the City Report. Since then, further projects such as the Anglican Church's 'Commission on Urban Life and Faith' and The William Temple Foundation's three-year initiative 'Regenerating Communities', have sought to address issues of poverty and community in contexts of rapid urban change. Insofar as these projects forge links between churches and society, they enhance what Putnam calls 'bridging social capital' – building valuable and mutually beneficial connections between different groups. Indeed, this process is arguably empowered by government intervention through the Faith Communities Unit, which oversees interaction between faith communities and the state.

Differences of belief can be a boundary to these developments, with more theologically conservative churches either focusing on the needs of their own members or preferring to channel their work through organizations, such as the Evangelical Alliance, that reflect their doctrinal position. Such churches often thrive on 'bonding social capital' – in-group cohesion – but sometimes at the expense of wider collaboration. However, some ecumenical initiatives suggest a more complex relationship. Indeed, projects in Northern Ireland have focused on bridging the sectarian divide between Protestant and Catholic in responding to social needs that apply to all those suffering under conditions of deprivation within particular localities (Bacon, 2003). This is a useful reminder that the relationship between theological allegiance and social action is complex, and is always mediated by the cultural context of the local church.

### *Practical ways of studying this aspect of local churches*

Worship entails a distinctive type of activity – momentary, focused on the otherworldly, often communal, incorporating both rational and non-rational behaviour. While research needs to sustain a critical distance, it also needs to portray something of the lived and total reality of the event itself. The most appropriate method is participant observation, as this is less intrusive than questionnaire or interview methods and therefore leaves room for observation and experience of

the multiple aspects of worship itself. It requires careful note-taking, either during or after the worship event. For some aspects – e.g. sermons and sung worship – tape recordings can be an invaluable resource if available. Participant observation is not, however, without its practical and ethical problems. Not least, one needs to tackle the problem of how much of a participant one is, taking care not to allow immersion to compromise the critical distance required of a sociological researcher. This may be an especially difficult problem for researchers who are committed Christians, or who are studying the worship of their own church. Members are in these circumstances likely to have expectations of the researcher that do not always sit comfortably with the needs of the research.

Non-Christians face different dilemmas, related to their self-presentation to church-members and their corresponding behaviour during church services. For example, while honesty may be the best policy, the researcher who sits apart from the congregation obtrusively taking notes may alienate or offend those present. When Steve Warner conducted his work in Mendocino (Warner, 1992), he resolved this problem by taking part in sung worship but not in holy communion, considering this to be consonant with his own identity without deceiving his research subjects.

Some researchers combine participant observation with interview techniques, working from the assumption that the meaning of a ritual event is constructed in a context wider than the event itself. 'Emic' (i.e. insider) understandings of worship may be accessed after church services, although a degree of sensitivity is required in approaching potential respondents, and questions are likely to be spur of the moment, and notes improvised. If more discursive data is required, for example on local 'theologies' of worship among a congregation, then data would be best elicited at a distance from the event itself, within the context of formal, recorded interviews.

### Case study

In March 2001, as part of an ongoing period of ethnographic fieldwork, I attended a communion service held by *Visions*, an 'alternative' worship group based in York. There were 22 people present: 12 from the *Visions* core group, who were responsible for arranging and running the service, 9 visitors and peripheral members (including myself), and the curate attached to the group's parent church, who was there in the capacity of celebrant. The announced theme of the service was 'Loss



and Moving On'. As always, the lights were dimmed, striking images were projected around the room, and the participants were seated on bean-bags or chairs in a circular formation, around the central communion table. Ambient trance music played at a subdued volume throughout the service.

After a period of liturgy, one of the core group took the microphone to introduce the week's prayer ritual. She referred back to the earlier Bible reading (2 Kings 2.1–12) about Elisha, who was sad because his master Elijah had been called to God and was to leave him. When Elijah was called, Elisha saw him riding to heaven on a chariot of fire, and his spirit passed from master to servant. She then invited us to write down our prayers to God, prayers about loss, bereavement, anger or grief, and place them in the small boat that was floating in a large container at the front of the room. Most of those present did this – using the paper and pens distributed – and approached the front to offer their prayers to God. Another member of the core group then ignited the boat and we all watched as the paper prayers went up in flames.

The worship of the *Visions* group must be seen in the light of the group's shared 'post-evangelical' theology: rooted in the Bible and a need for mission, but driven by the conviction that mainstream church services have little meaning for many people in a postmodern culture. They challenge evangelical conventions through their constant reinvention of worship space and ritual performance. There are no clear leaders in the service, organization and delivery are shared, and the mood is calm and unintrusive. Different prayer rituals are performed each week, and create room for ritual experimentation and spiritual exploration. But while this can be a source of meaning for those who find conventional evangelical worship constraining and unimaginative, it can be potentially alienating for those more used to mainstream symbolism. One newcomer I spoke to after the service said she found it 'difficult to focus on Jesus', she felt like she was browsing through a 'new age' shop. While worship sustains boundaries of meaning within congregations, it is sometimes used to challenge those boundaries through innovations that are liberating for some, but unsettling for others.

### *Further reading*

McGuire, M. (1982) *Pentecostal Catholics: Power, Charisma and Order in a Religious Movement*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

McGuire's impressive sociological study of the charismatic movement



among Roman Catholics includes two chapters on the use of ritual and language. Chapter 4 explores the way in which authority is mediated in prayer meetings, and chapter 5 offers a sociological analysis of divine communication through human agency, including a consideration of prophecy and glossolalia.

Peshkin, A. (1984) 'Odd Man Out: The Participant Observer in an Absolutist Setting', *Sociology of Education*, 57 (October), pp. 254-64.

Peshkin's research was based in a US Baptist school and church, institutions that supported a fundamentalist approach to Christian teaching. His article is an illuminating discussion of how he managed his own role as a participant observer, given his outsider status as a Jew.

Warner, R. S. (1988) *New Wine in Old Wine Skins: Evangelicals and Liberals in a Small-Town Church*, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press.

Warner's classic study of congregational change in California includes an illuminating chapter (pp. 66-87) on how he accessed the field and conducted his ethnographic research. This includes invaluable insights into the practicalities and ethics of participant observation.